Nearly Lost on the Alps.

Household Words — February 1858

"*Familiar in their Mouths as* HOUSEHOLD WORDS."—SHAKESPEARE.

HOUSEHOLD WORDS.

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NEARLY LOST ON THE ALPS.

Now that common-place security and accommodations of every description have, league by league, climbed up the Alps, tourists laugh at the idea of any accident occurring on even the most difficult passes. The inexperienced traveller, to be sure, abroad for the first time, and bewildered by novel impressions, converts the sleet-shower that overtook him on the Col de Balme, into a terrific storm; and even astonishes table d'hôtes with his thrilling history of how he was nearly dashed to pieces on the Gemmi, but for the iron grip of his guide. But the chronicles of the faithful Murray contain few records of anything remarkable having happened to anybody, anywhere, at any time, within the last half-century. Hence, the following plain narrative may be interesting as detailing a very narrow escape from death, in the height of the season, under very ordinary circumstances, and on one of the most popular passes of Switzerland. The Great St. Bernard:

Alpine tourists know that the ordinary road from Chamouni to the Convent is by the dull bourg of Martigny, in the Canton de Vallais. It is a wretched place, by all means to be avoided, if possible. Rank vegetation, putrid swamps, and a stagnant, stifling air combine to make it a hotbed of goître and idiotcy in their worst phases. Hideous, wen-laden heads on stunted misshapen bodies mop and mow and gibber at you from filthy doorways; a hopeless lethargy pervades alike the neglected town, the gasping trade, and the spiritless people: there is not one single thing to observe in the day; and at night, when the inundation of the Rhone is subsiding, the musquitoes—"cousins," as they are termed by the country people—come in such swarms, and clouds, and flights, and bite with such inflammatory viciousness, that Venice, or Naples, or Cairo would be a place of refuge by comparison.

I had slept at the comfortable little inn on the Tête Noire, and started at seven in the morning, on Thursday, the tenth of September last, with two chance fellow-travellers, and Venance Favret, a Chamouni guide, to see, if we could reach Orsières—a little town half-way up the St. Bernard pass—without going down to this wretched Martigny. When we arrived at the top of the Forclaz, the old gendarme, who lives there to stamp passports and sell refreshments, told us that there was a road, but that it was very difficult; and, therefore, as I had a baggage mule with me, we must take another hand. The route is not in Murray, and certainly it was troublesome enough to find: but, after a great deal of labour, and getting astray, and retracing our steps, we arrived at Orsières, at the angle where the Val d'Entremont joins the Val de Ferret, at two in the afternoon, in a heavy thunderstorm. My companions were knocked up, and declined coming on any further that day; but I was anxious to reach the Convent. For, Orsières is a dreary little place enough, and the Hôtel des Alpes, although clean and moderate, does not offer many attractions. Small mountain trout are all very well in their way; but I am not one of those travellers who think the mere ten minutes occupied in discussing them compensates for several hours of yawning in a gaunt roughly-furnished salle-à-manger. The eating of whitebait itself would form, in the abstract, a dull enjoyment if limited to that particular thing, rudely served-up in the back room of a third-rate inn. I am bold enough to declare that I don't care about whitebait; that, in fact, I think it an insipid failure; and that little shreds of batter, with lemon juice and cayenne pepper, would go down just as well. But add stewed eels, water souchée, and salmon cutlets, champagne cup, bright eyes, and ducks and green peas: and then, Mr. Hart, or Mr. Quartermaine, if you please I am your frequent visitor. So with Swiss trout: never be lured away from where you want to go, by its being made a spécialité of attraction, except there are some other inducements to back it up. For the pleasures of the palate are fleeting, but ennui is continuous.

I started from Orsières just as three in the afternoon struck for the second time, according to the custom of many churches in the Vallais, from the storm-worn grey steeple. I had above five hours' good work before me; so, already tolerably tired, I got a mule, and a man to bring it back, whose name was, as closely as I can recollect, Alexis Pelleuchord.

I mention this, for he turned out a right good fellow. Favret was getting his dinner while he rested his baggage-mule, and the other asked to sit down with him for a while: so I went off alone, knowing the road perfectly well, leaving them to come on as they pleased. The storm had passed, but the weather was still very sullen and threatening; and I heard that peculiar moaning noise amongst the mountains, which makes an Alpine traveller get on as fast as he can.

I have crossed the St. Bernard twelve or fourteen times, but I never saw the pass so utterly deserted as it was this day. Just above Orsières, where you make a steep short cut, to avoid the long zigzag of the road, some men were putting up a little wooden cross on the edge of the precipice. It was to mark the scene of a terrible accident which had happened the week before. Three men—Piedmontese—were going up to the Convent in one of those sideway cars, used on mountain roads. Just at this point the mule shied and backed the car over the edge of the road. The driver jumped off and was saved; but the car, the mule, and passengers went over the precipice, and were alike smashed to pieces: they must have fallen, at a rough estimate, a hundred and fifty feet. After I left these workmen, I did not meet another soul until I got to St. Pierre—the last village up the pass—and there a string of mules, with some guides sitting in their side-saddles, were starting on their way back to Orsières.

It was now five o'clock, and the weather was gradually becoming very bad. I had been thoroughly wet through some time, so the rain did not incommode me so much, but the wind was awful. It flew, shrieking and howling round the angles of the pass, like an icy knife, until it was as much as the mule could do to battle against it—sending the chill clouds, which now came right down the mountains, in whirls of mist around and above me, and blowing flakes of the cold brawling Drause quite across the path, which is here just on a level with the torrent. There was nothing like danger of any kind, or anything approaching to it; but the dead loneliness of the place, with its grim lichen-covered boulders, and roaring glacier waters, and freezing atmosphere, and entire absence of every trace of animal life, was altogether so dispiriting in the declining day, that, although every minute was an object, when I got to the "Canteen,"—the last human habitation up the pass,—I pulled up. Tumbling, rather than getting, off my mule (which I could not have done properly in any manner, as there was a sack of corn on the crupper), I blundered through the doorway. My teeth chattered so, that I could scarcely ask for a glass of hot brandy and water; and when I got it, my hands were so numbed and helpless, I could hardly lift it to my mouth. It must be borne in mind that I was now at an elevation of nearly seven thousand feet above the level of the sea—twice the height of Snowdon.

"A la Cantine," as a dismal little creaking weather-washed-out board describes it, is supposed by the people who keep it, to be an inn; but remote dwellers in mountains have ever been given to superstitions and hallucinations. Allowing it to be such, for an instant, then all the cabins of the Flegère, the Faulhorn, and the Col de Balme, take the comparative rank of the Hôtel de Louvre in Paris, the Great Western in London, and the Lord Warden at Dover. That ready anonymous authority of compilers of instructive works—"a recent traveller"—might describe it as an irregular-shaped mass of hollow granite, with square apertures pierced at intervals, some glazed to exclude air and admit light—others open to let out smoke and dilute smells. Its stone steps and passage afford such admirable skating-ground, that owing to his smooth shoe-nails, the tourist usually enters head over heels; and, on recovering from the surprise naturally incident to this novel introduction, finds he has pantomimically flip-flapped into the salle-à-manger, which is very like the inside of a large bathing-machine, and fitted up with a window, a shutter, a bench, and a latch. Here you can have blunt knives, and firewood, and salt, and all sorts of similarly nice things, including a very curious wine, which looks and tastes like—and may be for aught I know to the contrary—pickled-cabbage juice.

I found two travellers more, who had determined upon remaining for the night, rather than face the weather. I was, however, resolved upon reaching the Convent that night; and whilst I was finishing my cognac, as the landlord was pleased to call it—but there is no good brandy in Switzerland, even in the best hotels; it is chiefly adulterated rum—my man from Orsières came in, having walked uncommonly well. He told me Favret would not be after us for an hour; so we left word that he was to follow, and once more started on our journey.

It was getting quite dusk as we crossed the wild dreary plain that surrounds the Canteen, but the lightning was playing incessantly—almost without intermission. We had now three hours' work to reach the Convent; the actual road had ceased, and all human life was left behind us. There was nothing on every side but snow-covered peaks, grey débris of granite, and cold rushing waters, swollen and turbulent from the continuous rains. In about twenty minutes we had traversed the level, and arrived at the foot of the spur of Mont Velan, which appears to forbid all further progress; for it is here that the actual climbing the pass commences: hitherto the road from Martigny had never been steeper, to give a familiar instance, than Southampton Street, Strand, London, or the Rue de Courçelles, Paris; that is to say, on the

average; but then it is continuous—a ceaseless pull against the collar for nearly twenty-four miles. The difficulties encountered here by Napoleon in transporting his artillery, when he crossed the Alps in eighteen hundred, were equal to those in the famous forest of St. Pierre, two or three hours below.

The world appeared to close behind us as we mounted the first ridge; and the storm redoubled its fury in the gorge—so much so, that, at one time, the mule could scarcely make head against it. It was now about half-past six; but the lightning continued vivid enough to show us the track clearly enough; and the water was pouring down so fast from the heights, that we were really walking up small cascades all the way, the route, such as it was, affording the readiest channel. Nothing occurred for an hour, until we reached the dreary dead-house, and the neighbouring refuge—two low stone-huts at the side of the path; one affording the rudest shelter, and the other forming a depository for the bones of travellers lost, from time to time, upon the pass. These must not be confounded with the actual Morgue, near the Convent, where the bodies are now placed. When the weather is very bad, the servant of the Convent comes down as far as this point in the afternoon, to see if any assistance is needed; and, if the snow is deep on the pass, then it is that the services of the dogs are most valuable. They scent out the way, and find a track where a false step to the right or the left would be fatal; the drift making path and precipice all smooth alike. This, after all, is their chief use; and the monks themselves repudiate the romantic stories told about them.

Beyond this point our troubles commenced. The lightning ceased, and the rain was gradually turning into a cutting sleet. For half an hour or more, we groped our way as well as we could, both being tolerably acquainted with the ground, as I have stated; but, on arriving at the Pont d'Hudri, which is a mere slab of stone about the size of a Turkish hearth-rug, over a thundering torrent, I did not think it safe to ride any further. So I got off, and we sent the mule on first, which was a good notion; for her life had been passed in going up and down the pass; and she knew every hole she had to put her foot into, and every block she had to step over.

We went on—I cannot say in silence, for the roar of the storm and the water combined was almost deafening, but without speaking to one another, until suddenly the mule stopped and turned round, and we found we were upon hard snow. We could only tell this by our feet, for it was now too dark for even the refraction of the white surface.

"What is to be done, now?" I asked of Pelleuchord.

"Mais, Monsieur, je ne sais pas," was the reply; "faut retrouver la route." (Really, I don't know, sir; we must find out the road again.)

But to go back was out of the question. Presently the man said,

"We cannot stay here, sir."

"And we can't go on."

"One must stop with the mule, and the other must see if he can reach the Convent. It is not twenty minutes ahead of us."

Either alternative was dreary enough. At last we decided that I should remain with the mule, and Pelleuchord should try if there was a chance of getting some assistance. He crunched over the snow for a few steps, and then his footfall was lost in the noise of the rain and sleet and the torrents.

For the first ten minutes or so, I did not much care. I got to the leeward of the mule, which kept a little of the cutting drift from me, and, sticking my bâton into the snow as firmly as I could, tied the halter round it. But before long I got very cold. I did not dare move; for I heard rushing water on every side of me—it was even running over the surface of the snow against my feet. And then, as one drearily prolonged minute crept on after another, I thought, "What will become of me, if Pelleuchord should not come back?"

I have twice in my life known what it is to expect immediate death. I have had the muzzles of three or four loaded guns touching my head at the same time; and I have been falling, in a ruptured balloon, from a height of several thousand feet; my state of feeling, in each case, was that of a dead, almost preternatural calm, which I never could account for: but the agony of mind I now endured was too great to portray, apart from what would appear a carefully-built exaggeration. I knew, that with my feet freezing, and ice hanging about my beard and moustaches, on the very edge of the Alpine level of perpetual snow, and entirely unable to move a foot from where I was, this state of things could not last long; that I should gradually become drowsy, without the power to rouse myself; and that my body would be found next morning, stark and dead, by the first people who came down from the Convent. Much else that I thought about I do not care here to mention; but, through all, the most ridiculous and commonplace ideas would keep thrusting themselves, even to the roar of the water accommodating itself, in time, to the words of stupid songs; and a thought that, with the ice about my face I must have looked like a picture of Christmas I had seen somewhere in an illustrated paper.

I was in this terrible position more than half an hour. Several times I shouted as loud as I could; but my voice was nothing against the wind that was tearing down from the south-west; in fact, it was carried away from the Hospice. Once I heard the dogs, and my heart beat as if it would have come through my ribs; but the bark was not repeated. I had a little brandy with me, and

I finished it off from a flask: and then I got the sack of corn from the mule's back and stood upon it for a little time, to keep my feet out of the water; but I was too cold to feel any remedy or change. I even thought of a story I had read years and years ago, of some one who, overcome by a snow-storm on a moor in Devonshire, killed his horse, and cut the body open to get into it; and how both were found frozen next morning; and I felt in my pouch to see if I had still got my knife there.

Suddenly I heard a distant shout! I answered it, and it was repeated; and the next minute I saw a light up the pass before me, rapidly coming down, as it zig-zagged along the different turns; and, in a few minutes, Pelleuchord was at my side. So great was the revulsion of feeling, and my whole chest fluttered so—I can find no better term—that I could hardly speak; nor, indeed, do I clearly recollect how I reached the Convent. I only remember that when I did get there, I burst out into a violent, hysterical flood of tears, and found my old friend, M. Meillan, the Clavendier, who receives the guests, embracing me with the most honest delight, as soon as I was recognised.

He dragged me, thawing and dripping as I was, into the visitors' room, where a dozen travellers had just finished supper, amongst whom, to my great joy, I discovered a member of my own club, and another friend, whose pleasant book of adventure is at the present time being reviewed in the papers. Those other ladies and gentlemen who were at the St. Bernard on the tenth of September last year, may remember how I was put into a hot-air room to dry; how I was unable to touch the supper the good monks provided, from re-action and exhaustion; and yet how many questions I had to answer.

But they will not be able to describe what my own feelings were, when I found myself in my bedroom; or how I expressed my gratitude for my great deliverance.

It may be added, that, on recollecting we had told Favret to follow us, Pelleuchord and another guide started off again, and found him—mule, baggage, and all—on the very spot where we had been stopped. The snow was not this year's,—it was the remainder of an avalanche that had killed two poor fellows in the spring; and Meillan showed me their bodies in the Morgue next morning.

The storm I had encountered was one of the most violent they had experienced for years. That same night, it carried away an entire village, with all its inhabitants, close to the Fort Bard in the valley of Aosta. The road, also, was so destroyed, that the Ivrea diligence could not leave Aosta; and I passed the spot on foot, two days afterwards, with the friends alluded to above. Thirty bodies were then lying crushed and drowned, in the little church.

I was right about the dog's bark I had heard. Meillan told me it was that of "notre jeune chienne Diane." She was the only one out that night, but did not come down, as Pelleuchord did not want help when he had once got a lantern. I may add, that my excellent friend gave her to me, next morning, as a souvenir of the occurrence: and that she is now at home in England.

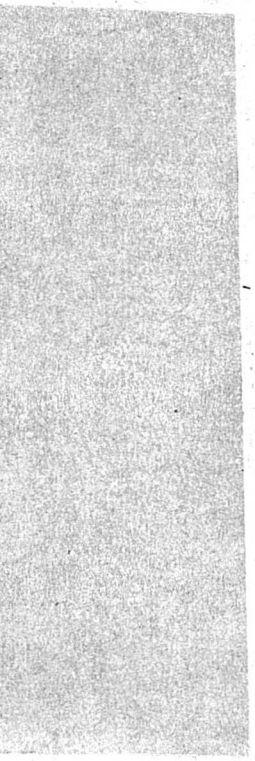
A SERMON FOR SEPOYS.

WHILE we are still fighting for the possession of India, benevolent men of various religious denominations are making their arrangements for taming the human tigers in that country by Christian means. Assuming that this well-meant scheme is not an entirely hopeless one, it might, perhaps, not be amiss to preach to the people of India, in the first instance, out of some of their own books—or, in other words, to begin the attempt to purify their minds by referring them to the excellent moral lessons which they may learn from their own Oriental literature. Such lessons exist in the shape of ancient parables, once addressed to the ancestors of the sepoys, and still quite sufficient for the purpose of teaching each man among them his duty towards his neighbour, before he gets on to higher things. Here is a specimen of one of these Oriental apologues. Is there any reason why it should not be turned to account, as a familiar introduction to the first Christian sermon addressed to a pacified native congregation in the city of Delhi?

In the seventeenth century of the Christian era, the Emperor Shah Jehan—the wise, the bountiful, the builder of the new city of Delhi — saw fit to appoint the pious Vizir, Gazee Ed Din, to the government of all the district of Morodabad.

The period of the Vizir's administration was gratefully acknowledged by the people whom he governed as the period of the most precious blessings they had ever enjoyed. He protected innocence, he honoured learning, he rewarded industry. He was an object for the admiration of all eyes,—a subject for the praise of all tongues. But the grateful people observed, with grief, that the merciful ruler who made them all happy, was himself never seen to smile. His time, in the palace, was passed in mournful solitude. On the few occasions when he appeared in the public walks, his face was gloomy, his gait was slow, his eyes were fixed on the ground. Time passed, and there was no change in him for the better. One morning the whole population was astonished and afflicted by news that he had resigned the reins of government and had gone to justify himself before the emperor at Delhi.

Admitted to the presence of Shah Jehan, the Vizir made his obeisance, and spoke these words:—



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